

Sermon: Rev Susanna Pain
7 December 2008

Advent 2A

READING

Isaiah 40: 1-11

- Travelling to Temora – a plague of locusts and heavy galahs.

Comfort, Comfort ye my people. (Is. 40:1)

The prophet we call second Isaiah speaks to a people in exile in Babylon 2,500 years ago.

'Comfort, Comfort, my people.'

Handel quotes in his Messiah.

'Comfort, Comfort, my people.'

The prophet speaks to those in exile today, refugees, victims of war, those tossed out of families or communities, exiled from society... Does he speak to you?

to those whose savings are disappearing before their eyes, those who are ill and whose loved ones are ill, those in the desert of consumerism and Christmas decorations ...

in the CFC, current financial crisis ...?

'Comfort, Comfort, my people'

says the prophet. He says to the leaders:

'prepare the way, make straight the path through the wilderness'

home

to Jerusalem, to God.

The prophet speaks of an awesome powerful God whose breath destroys the people; setting this image alongside an immanent gentle pasturing God, carrying the small ones close and leading the carers.

The prophet speaks of the physical – the King's Highway from Babylon to Jerusalem, the road through the desert, a road for trade in spices and food, a road for armies to conquer; a vital trade route.

The Israelites had once travelled home on this road from Egypt in the west, now they are called to return home from the east.

On this road Jesus speaks of dangers – of the good Samaritan. On this road Paul encounters the Christ, on this road Peter meets the Ethiopian eunuch – this physical journey is through the desert. This parallels the spiritual journey...

Our journeys are generally comfortable – in air conditioned cars on safe straight freeways – not toughened bare feet in searing desert heat.

Temora experiences ...

But paradoxically, the journey to Christmas is through the desert for many.

This week I have met so many who are tired, exhausted even, struggling to make it. Brother Roger from Taizé urges us (*Lost in Wonder*, p.22) to ask the help of the Holy Spirit, wait patiently, expectantly, lovingly, longingly.

'See yourself as the parched ground looking upwards waiting patiently for the rain to fall. You can only wait.' He says.

The prophet calls us home through this desert, this wilderness – that is the starting point. The prophet calls us back to the centre, which is God – to the feed trough and the vulnerable child –

calls us to the centre;
the ground of our being –

who journeys with us in this wilderness, from our comfortable exile.

Where is God? God is here inviting us to more ...

It is no coincidence that on this second Sunday in Advent, this reading is paired with Mark Chapter 1, also set in the desert, also in a time of occupation. No mucking around – 'the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ', he announces, and then this very Isaiah quote:

*'the voice of one crying out in the wilderness
prepare the way of the lord
make straight his paths ...'* (Mk 1, Is 40)

and everyone from the surrounding regions were coming to him, to John, attracted despite themselves to this wild, unkempt prophet hurling abuse and challenge, offering baptism, cool refreshing water in the desert, a daring new beginning in the desert. Coming home.

It often takes harsh words to shake us out of our comfort zone.

harsh words
a shock
a poor prognosis
redundancy
a time of wilderness
to focus our thinking,
to lead us home, to the centre
to our core values,
back to God –
(or away)

and it takes will power, discipline, to head home, to create space for God to open our arms to receive this babe.

*Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed
and all people shall see it together.*

Say to the people:

*'Here is your God.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd.
He will gather the lambs in his arms
and carry them in his bosom
and gently lead the mother sheep ...' (Is 40:11)*

And John says:

'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water. But he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.' (Mk 1:8)

This is how Mark begins his Gospel – this is the heart of the matter – bang, straight away, right in, no preamble. This is Chapter 1, verse 8. Then in the very next verse Jesus is there being baptized himself. Mark's urgency pushes us forward.

No mucking around –
a response is called for ...

What can it be, this close to Christmas?

Take a deep breath
Take stock.
You can do it.
It is Advent – the beginning of the church's year ...

And the prophet is encouraging
'Comfort, Comfort, my people...'
here, in the midst of all this,
is your God.

How do you respond?

Prepare the way – that is the call of Advent. Go through your wilderness –
Prepare a path so God may find you and comfort you. (blooming cactus)

Yesterday was St Nicholas Day – St Nick, an early saint who saw the needs of others and gave anonymously to a single mother and her two daughters.
Yesterday many, many people did the same, donating food to Anglicare to make a difference preparing the way for God to comfort others.